The People You Haven’t Heard of Who Rule You

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of non-elected power brokers, lobbyists, and factional leaders in Australian politics. It argues that while citizens vote for parties and leaders, the decisions that shape governance are often made by unelected individuals and organizations operating behind the scenes. Key case studies include factional operators in major political parties, the Australian Banking Association (ABA), the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA), and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. The article situates these actors within a broader framework of democratic accountability and institutional power.

Introduction

Australian politics is frequently framed as a contest between party leaders and electoral mandates. However, beneath the surface lies a network of unelected influencers who exert decisive control over candidate selection, policy direction, and regulatory frameworks. These figures and organizations rarely appear on the ballot but shape governance in profound ways. This article explores four key dimensions of such influence: factional operators in the Liberal and Labor parties, the Australian Banking Association, the Minerals Council of Australia, and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia.

Factional Power Brokers

Factionalism is integral to both the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Liberal Party of Australia. In New South Wales, factional operatives such as Michael Photios (Liberal Moderates) and Khal Asfour (Labor Right) exemplify the influence of unelected individuals. Photios, through Premier State Consulting, has long shaped Liberal preselections in Sydney’s North Shore, while Asfour, as Mayor of Canterbury–Bankstown, controls Labor branch networks in western Sydney. These actors determine political careers and party balance, functioning as kingmakers outside the public eye.

The Banking Lobby: Australian Banking Association (ABA)

The ABA represents the major banks and exemplifies the ‘revolving door’ between politics and corporate lobbying. Former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh served as CEO from 2017 to 2025, followed by former Federal Finance Minister Simon Birmingham. The ABA’s board includes the chief executives of the four largest banks (CBA, Westpac, NAB, ANZ). This

structure gives the ABA unparalleled access to government decision-making on regulation, taxation, and consumer policy. The appointment of ex-political leaders underscores the alignment between banking interests and political influence.

The Mining Lobby: Minerals Council of Australia (MCA)

The MCA has historically wielded extraordinary influence, particularly during the 2010 campaign against the Resource Super Profits Tax, which contributed to the downfall of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Current CEO Tania Constable continues the tradition of embedding mining priorities in national policy debates. The MCA channels significant resources into advertising, lobbying, and direct engagement with policymakers, ensuring mining remains politically protected.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia

The Pharmacy Guild is a smaller but highly effective lobby. It defends the interests of community pharmacy owners, guarding ownership rules and shaping PBS (Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme) policy. Leaders such as Trent Twomey and George Tambassis have cultivated bipartisan influence. The Guild has been described as the most effective lobby in Canberra per dollar spent, demonstrating how concentrated interests can achieve outsized political results.

Discussion

The presence of these unelected influencers raises fundamental questions about democratic accountability. While voters choose between parties, factions and lobbies often determine the range of candidates and the scope of feasible policy. The persistence of these networks across electoral cycles highlights the structural nature of their power. Addressing this influence may require stronger transparency rules, limits on lobbying, and reforms to preselection processes.

Conclusion

This analysis underscores the importance of recognizing the unelected figures who shape Australian governance. Factional bosses such as Michael Photios and Khal Asfour, together with lobby groups like the ABA, MCA, and Pharmacy Guild, wield enduring power. They are the people Australians have not voted for, yet they decisively shape the nation’s political and economic trajectory.

References

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